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ABSTRACT

Most plans for school reform depend on agencies of the federal government, states, and districts for codifying, assessing, and communicating standards. This paper outlines the appropriate responsibilities and associated language for the major educational agencies involved in standards and assessment. It proposes that educational assessment should be based on a concentric-circle model, rather than on a hierarchical model. School reform's purpose is to support and guide education while protecting classrooms from intrusions that undermine the autonomy of teachers and children. Action from the outside toward the center guides and provides for learning; action from center outward reports educational processes and outcomes. The paper argues, first, that the twin agents of reform--standards and assessment--should be grounded in practice and worked out in schools and classrooms. Second, the nearer to the classroom, the more concrete the language describing standards and assessment should be. Assessment practices themselves must be guided by two main criteria: (1) they must not undermine good educational practice at the classroom level, and (2) they should provide useful information for equity decisions and policy formation. The energy and resources of the reform movement need to focus more directly on the classroom. Standards, in dynamic interaction with assessment, can emerge in the context of children's work. The surrounding structures provide resources and encourage reform. In short, reform should flow from the center out. (LMI)

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WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?
SPHERES OF POWER, AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY AND THE REFORM OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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March, 1995

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The subject to be explored, "Authentic Assessment: The Tensions Between Top Down and Bottom Up Reform," is complex. It is hard to know where and how to enter the discussion. First, however, I want to change the language and associated image to one of concentric circles like the pattern of ripples set off by dropping a stone into still water. In the center are children and teachers (both professional school teachers and parents or caretakers-as-teachers); in the next ring are school-based administrators; then, successively, system administrators, district school committees or boards, state boards and administrators and, in the outermost ring, the federal government. Each of these rings of stake-holders, has a legitimate interest in the educational process and its results.

There are two reasons why I prefer the flat image of concentric circles to the ladder-like, vertical one: first of all, I don't like to consign children and teachers to "the bottom;" it's not good for them nor for those thinking about them. I do not want to accept, certainly not reinforce, the hierarchy of power the vertical model implies. It is true, of course, that the authority invested in those in the outer rings - from school principals to the Secretary of Education in Washington - appears to outweigh the authority of those nearer to the center. In the outer ring are the people who make laws, mandate procedures and allocate funds. But, in a real sense, the ultimate power resides in the center, in the classroom, with the child's willingness to learn (or not learn). The exercise of this power depends most immediately on interactions between teacher and student with the student having ultimate control. No one can be made to learn.

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from the federal and state levels towards the school and classroom, there is pressure to maintain and improve the educational experience of school children. This pressure takes the form of advice or recommendations of various kinds - some mandated, some suggested. The recommendations become increasingly specific until, as in the example cited above, they bear directly on an action - like the student completing the story about the lost key.

A complementary flow of information moves from the center, the classroom, outward. Although standardized test results still constitute the basic data reported out from the classroom and school to all audiences, more qualitative information - work samples, for instance - is currently being explored for these purposes. The story about the lost key , first evaluated by the child and teacher, and included as a piece of the evidence of that child's literacy learning, can be incorporated in a portfolio shown to parents. Then, along with a sampling of the work of other students, it becomes part of the data passed on to school, district, state and federal agencies.

To make this dynamic clearer, one could describe the motion from the outside towards the center as having to do with guiding and providing for learning; the reverse direction, from the center outward, having to do with reporting on the educational process and results. Assessment, the relationship between the two - between recommendations and results - takes place on all levels. The classroom is on both the receiving end and giving-out start of communications. This is the focal point - where the educational process takes place that warrants all the other administrative actions, structures and deliverances.

In order that the classroom function in purposeful, energized and effective ways, it needs to be protected from over-prescribed curriculum content, methods and timetables; in other words, protected from intrusions that cramp the style and undermine the autonomy of both teachers and children. Teachers have to be allowed a considerable degree of freedom in order to adapt the curriculum and instruction to different learning styles and needs; also to be able to respond to individual interests and local, serendipitous, opportunities for learning. Teachers themselves need to be seen as

full human beings (not as instruments for conveying the curriculum), encouraged to invent and innovate and to make use of their own areas of knowledge and enthusiasms.[1] An over-prescribed curriculum "laid on" a school or classroom is based on distrust of teachers. It narrows and desiccates both teaching and learning. A good classroom, in contrast, generates intellectual activity and excitement and develops imagination and inventiveness on the part of both teachers and students.

To be able to explore and invent with confidence, however, most teachers do need guidelines for developmentally appropriate learning expectations that they can then turn into teaching events. It is interesting and educational to explore the area to either side of the path if you have a well-marked path itself within view. Teachers will also need opportunities (not training!) to think for themselves and invent the curriculum within the received guidelines.

If school reform, then, is to support and guide education while protecting classrooms from over- prescription, what kind of responsibilities should be assigned to the various administrative rings? What language is appropriate for which? Since the terms to some extent define responsibilities, they must be consistent with the degree of specificity that is maximally useful and minimally constraining at any particular level: the nearer to the classroom, the more concrete the language should be; the further from the classroom, the more general.

Returning, then, to the outermost ring, the U.S. government, its responsibilities are to oversee equity among the states - to see that , no matter where they live, all children have access to quality educational opportunities - and, a recent addition, to maintain the level of education in the United States relative to the rest of the world.
The broad and lofty statements issued by presidents, secretaries of education, and ad hoc commissions, in general establish principles for the educational enterprise much as the Bill of Rights established principles for governing the country.

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[1] It should be added, however, that, because of their own experiences and training, teachers are not always prepared to take initiative. They sometimes need time and incentives before feeling confident enough to implement their own curricular ideas.

A statement like, "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated..." [2] needs to be interpreted for the occasion. So does the statement, "Each child has the right to a first class education...." The fact that these rights don't necessarily prevail - that in many instances people continue to have their rights to security violated and children continue to receive third class educations - does not mean the statements have no usefulness. Articulated principles provide a basis for striving, for keeping the collective public mind on commonly shared values. These values can then be interpreted through the lower courts or, in the case of education, through state and community agencies, and end up in action. They are worth having - even when, in a particular instance or at a particular moment in history, they don't seem to be proving that worth.

The responsibilities of state departments of education are similar to those of the central government although pertaining to smaller geo-political units: to ensure accessibility, oversee equity among districts and to define the proper domains of learning and promote good practice. Leaving aside for the time being questions of equity and the related issue of assessment as it pertains to equity, what can state administrators legitimately do to improve education? They can set forth theory about how children learn and suggest what kinds of structures they believe will best promote this learning; they can influence pedagogy through teacher certification requirements; and, finally, they can describe areas of the curriculum, preferably in broad but realistic terms - realistic, that is, compared to those of federal agencies because they are closer to implementation. The language of federal mandates tends to be lofty, that of the state, somewhat more "down to earth."

The following recommendations for student learning in Social Studies, History and Geography, [3] leave districts room for further refinement and translation into learning events.

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[2] Bill of Rights, Amendment IV

[3] These three paragraphs are excerpted from excerpted from the Massachusetts Common Core of Learning

> Know and make connections among important historical events, themes and issues; recognize the role the past has played in shaping the present; and understand the process by which individuals and groups develop and work within political, social, economic, cultural and geographic contexts.
>
> Synthesize and communicate information about important events and fundamental concepts in Massachusetts, United States and world history, including historical documents such as the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Bill of Rights, Federalist Papers and the Gettysburg Address.
>
> Know important information regarding the physical environment and understand concepts such as location and place, critical features of a region, demographic trends and patterns, and the relationship between people and the environment.

These recommendations effectively portray the field. Further specification would entail more follow-up to make sure the districts are doing as advised[4]: the more detailed the state recommendations, the more financial resources and paperwork will be required for checking up. The burden of specificity is often borne by district administrators who feel overwhelmed by paperwork and generally put upon. Resentment is likely to be felt, too, in schools and classrooms. Such reactions are common and have to do not only with the imposition of paperwork but with the lack of trust such suggestions or mandates imply, lack of trust that districts, schools, teachers and children will act responsibly.

An additional issue is that of overlapping recommendations and repetition of terms. How many "benchmarks," "frameworks" and the like can a busy practitioner hold in mind? It seems appropriate for state administrators to keep recommendations relatively simple and broad and leave details to those who work closer to students and teachers. "Guidelines" yes; "frameworks," no.

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[4] The Massachusetts Common Core of Learning is actually being further defined as subject area "frameworks" each of which contains "concepts themes and issues that students should know and be able to do at different grade span levels... the frameworks will also contain specific content standards at grades four, eight, ten, and twelve that describe what students should know and be able to do. These content standards are organized under core concepts that define the essential knowledge base of the discipline." Education Today, Massachusetts Department of Education, Vol. 10, No., December 30, 1994. p. 1.

We now come to districts. School districts are also responsible for the quality of the education students are receiving and for maintaining equity among local schools. They can influence instruction through hiring and firing and in-service programs. Acting within recommendations or mandates from the federal Department of Education and the state departments of education, district superintendents and boards can appropriately prescribe more closely what should be taught, when and how.

The following excerpt from a draft Language Arts Curriculum Framework [5] contains a policy statement further specified in a rationale, objectives, suggested learning events and suggested assessment data:

Policy Statement 1: Integrated Language Arts

Students will use language daily to broaden their understanding of themselves and the world, experiencing as they do so the interconnectedness of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Rationale
This policy statement asserts three fundamental principles of language arts education. First, language arts learning is activity based: we learn about language through the daily use of language. Second, language arts learning is purposeful, linked always to our efforts to make sense of the world. Third, the language arts are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. When we read a text, we talk about it and write about it. When we write, we read our work aloud to others, who listen and respond. These three principles underlie all our efforts in language arts, K-12.

Objectives, Policy Statement 1
K-3
1. Engages daily in reading, writing, speaking and listening activities
2. Connects reading with writing, speaking, and listening
3. Reads, writes, and speaks for a variety of purposes and audiences
....etc.

Suggested Learning Events, Policy Statement 1
K-3
- Shared reading
- Individual and collaborative writing
- Guided reading

[5] excerpted from draft, Language Arts Curriculum Framework, K-12, local school system.

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- Guided reading
- Paired reading
- Home-school reading

.....etc.

Assessments, Policy Statement 1
K-3

- Writing portfolio
- Literacy Inventory (Documentation and Assessment of Student Progress)
- Teacher observations, including Observation Survey (Marie Clay)
- Anecdotal records
- Journals
- Exhibitions of understanding: projects, presentation[6]

.....etc.

Both the language and contents of the above enable the reader to begin visualizing an actual classroom: children reading in pairs, writing in their journals, displaying their work, and so on. It suggests a view of learning, purposes, activities, and pedagogy It also suggests the kind of data useful for assessment but not the methods or criteria.

Moving in from the district, the school itself is in the next-to-center ring. Schools are on the receiving end of recommendations from the U.S. government, state departments of education and district administrations. School administrators, advised by a school council (in some districts) and community of parents, interpret these recommendations in the light of their particular population of students. Recommendations from the outside are further specified and translated into materials - e.g. journals, trade books, cameras, art materials - and accommodated in the schedule and structures of the school. School-based administrators are also responsible for seeing that there is some consistency of pedagogy and continuity of content from one grade level to the next, that good teaching practices are discussed, understood, and exercised and that all children are respected for who they are (not for what the school wants them to become).

Finally, the classroom. Although guidelines, frameworks, and administrative decisions guide the educational agenda in general terms, teachers and children should have

room to create a curriculum that is their own - one that takes advantage of their experiences and knowledge, that engages their minds and encourages initiative and imagination . The classroom needs not only to be protected from over-control but positively supported and encouraged. The whole educational structure from the federal government to the classroom thus becomes "child-centered". The focus for energy in school reform should be the scene where teaching and learning take place. Children's active, seeking role in their own education needs to be recognized and cultivated; teachers need to be supported and given opportunities for their own learning and development.

What actually goes on much of the time in elementary school classrooms is routine and boring: skills-based worksheets and dull texts. Learning is often a question of persuasion backed up by grades, punishments, notes home and deprivation of various kinds of privileges or, conversely, by grades again, recognition and awards. Rarely does interest itself play a motivational role. The result, the overall level of learning is generally and publicly deplored. The common solutions offered are further prescription, more testing, more and usually higher standards formulated by administrators at a distance from the scene where the educational process takes place. The evidence is that these remedies don't work - or we would not be searching so desperately for measures of reform. The focus on skills is rationalized as necessary preparation for standardized tests: "raising test scores," the rallying cry in communities across the country, has become, ironically, one of the reasons for classrooms remaining monotonous and students kept from being educated.

Responsible education agencies at all levels recently have begun to recognize not only the inadequacies of standardized testing for instructional purposes but also their negative effects on the whole educational enterprise. "Authentic assessment" - portfolios, presentations, assessment tasks, and the like - are being developed as positive alternatives. These, of course, unlike standardized tests, originate in the classroom and represent directly what students know and can do. They too, however, have to be protected now from outside control and over-standardization.

The question, then, narrows down to the dual functions of assessment: upholding quality and assuring equity. How can these functions be performed at the various administrative levels without losing sight of children and classrooms? Since the district, state and federal governments do have responsibilities for quality and equity, how can these responsibilities be most effectively met? Assessment practices themselves have to be assessed by two main criteria: 1) that they not undermine good educational practice on the classroom level; 2) that they provide useful information for equity decisions and policy-making.

Beginning with quality, I believe standards have to emerge from the classroom, negotiated by teachers and students. Meaningful standards are exemplified in work itself - contextualized, not extracted. One can recognize when a third grader's story has a successful conclusion but "conclusions" can't be prescribed out of context. Products and performances are discussed and evaluated in a community of learners, guided by the teacher. Evidence in the form of portfolios, "tasks" (e.g. oral reading tapes) and other kinds of classroom records attest to learning. The portfolios are reviewed (rather than scored) and students not producing work appropriate to their age/grade (judging by the work of their peers in the class and community) may receive extra attention. Children in grade three, in others words, should be reading and understanding books at an appropriate level, writing stories that communicate to an audience as expected for this grade, understanding math concepts and processes being taught, and so on. In short, third graders should be managing a "developmentally appropriate" curriculum. A rich collection of student work will attest to the student's learning (as well as to style, interests and many other relevant qualities).

School-based administrators, in conjunction with the classroom teachers, review the portfolios and ad hoc "tasks" for quality, for evidence that the curriculum meets the district recommendations (framework) and that the transitions of both curriculum and expectations from grade to grade are logical. They also organize assessment data

school-wide: pass-along portfolios (or "archives"[7]) of student work and select sample portfolios to be reviewed at the district level.

District administrators audit the "opportunities for learning"[8] in all district schools to ensure equity. They review sample portfolios and results of assessment tasks from each school in consultation with principals in order to assess the quality and level of students learning and make sure there is comparability among schools in the district. Finally, they oversee opportunities offered to classroom teachers and make sure the educational program in each school conforms with district policy as set forth in the framework.

State administrators receive aggregated data about "opportunities-for-learning" (which include local budgets for education), allowing them to oversee equity in this area. They also review student learning in the various districts. The sheer amount of qualitative data produced all over the state, however, necessitates reducing it by some means to manageable proportions. There are two possibilities: turning quality into quantity - scoring the portfolios of student work - or reviewing a representative sample of portfolios.

Several states and national agencies are attempting to score student portfolios with an acceptable level of interrater reliability. The effort required, however, seems gargantuan and is therefore perhaps doomed to failure.[9] In addition, there is a strong temptation to make the process of scoring easier by standardizing the portfolio contents themselves - which would defeat most of the purposes of having student-initiated collections in the first place: instead of deciding what to include, often for idiosyncratic,

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[7] Some schools have begun a process of passing along from one grade to the next a sampling of student work in each area of the curriculum. For a description of this process, see Hall, Lynne, Lynn Stuart and Brenda Engel. The Cambridge Handbook of Documentation and Assessment: Child Portfolios and Teacher Records in the Primary Grades. Grand Forks, North Dakota: North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation. (monograph, 1995).

[8] Standards for opportunities-to-learn are being developed. They have to do with the conditions under which children learn in school rather than achievement. See, for instance: Rauth, Marilyn. Opportunity-too-Learn Standards: Questions & Answers. Andover, MA: The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast & Islands. 1994.

[9] See: The New Standards Project, a joint program of the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh and the National Center on Education and the Economy; and the State of Vermont's Portfolio Assessment Program.

personal reasons, students would be required to meet imposed, uniform demands. Furthermore, as quality is converted to quantity, the presence of the student and the reality of the classroom become lost, submerged in numbers. Consequently, the results are not easily usable: they don't indicate remedies - which is one of the problems too with standardized testing.

An alternative possibility is statistical sampling of student work - review on the state level of representative selections of portfolios from all districts. This possibility seems to me to offer the most promise. The quality of student learning and something of the nature of the actual school experience would be conveyed directly to state administrators: what literature is being read, how art is integrated into the curriculum, what students are getting out of "hands-on-science," and so on.

The question is: are numbers necessary? If so, when and why? The fact that we are used to having them, although true enough, is not a persuasive reason. Numbers are doing a lot of damage- both in the collecting and in the uses to which they are put. There has to be an urgent reason, I believe, to ever quantify children's learning: the results appear temptingly simple but simplicity is obtained at the expense of accuracy and relevance. The neatness of numbers, the belief in "hard" data and "objectivity", should not, in themselves, lead us to automatically adopt procedures that might be counter-productive to good education. The only justification for quantification of learning is the perceived need for two kinds of comparability: past with future, "this" with "others". At the state level, the data from in-class "assessment tasks" can be aggregated in order to meet the first of these perceived needs, to compare communities. The content of portfolios themselves will meet the second perceived need by providing evidence of significant improvements in learning - without being scored.

The US Department of Education can continue to articulate the principles that underlie and guide public education (e.g. that all children can become successful school learners). To oversee equity among the states, they can look at budgets, review data from state departments of education and perhaps continue to administer tests to a representative sampling of students from various regions, ethnic groups and economic

levels.[10] Again, whatever the assessment, it should be aligned with generally established educational values - although a sampling at this remote level is less likely, than at state and district levels, to influence teaching in schools.

This projection of "what might - or should- be" simplifies the actual situation, of course, and ignores the complications of politics, the tenacity of vested interests and the general inertia or resistance to change. However, if it takes a crisis to reform huge institutional structures like public education, a crisis is what we have: children are not generally engaged in school learning nor are they being prepared adequately for work or play in the world of the near future. Educational reform in fact is already happening in virtually every community in the country. My argument has been that the energy and resources of the reform movement need to focus more directly on the classroom - on enabling those who work there to make it into a place of joy, interest, creativity and learning. Here standards, in dynamic interaction with assessment, can emerge in the context of children's work. The surrounding structures can provide resources and encourage reform. All the frameworks, standards, goals, and objectives in the world, however, will not in themselves change or improve the educational experience of children. Only teachers and children themselves can manage that.

The short answer is: reform "from the center out."

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[10] for instance, some version of The National Assessment of Educational Progress

The second reason why I prefer the circular image is because it encourages a more rational portrayal of the activities and responsibilities of the various stake-holders. The intense, concrete, minute-by-minute events of the educational process take place in a concentrated space. People who spend time in elementary school classrooms are familiar with their characteristic atmosphere of energy and intensity, even actual physical heat. This is where the curriculum is enacted, made three-dimensional. The further one gets from the classroom-as-center, the more events and their associated language inevitably become generalized, distanced, and idealized All the stakeholders in their various ways are asserting what , when and how children should be learning. Their words, in mandates, political statements, exhortations, slogans, frameworks, standards, benchmarks, outcomes, goals, objectives, and expectations, range from the lofty and ambitious to the closely prescriptive.

In the area of literacy learning, for example, children say things like, "I think the one I wrote last week was better - about the kittens. This story is getting all mixed up." Teachers say things like, "This is a good beginning but you stop right in the middle of the story. What happened after you lost the key? Did you ever get in?" Parents say things like, "If you want to watch 'The Simpsons,' first you have to finish correcting that story you brought home." School principals say things like, "All second graders should be spending at least two periods a week in writing workshop." District superintendents write things like, "Second grade students should engage regularly in reading, writing, speaking and listening activities." State commissioners write things like, "Students should have experience writing for a variety of purposes and audiences." Finally, in the outermost ring, furthest removed from the action, an anonymous, neutral voice mandates things like, "By the year 2000, all students entering school will be ready to learn" - or "will achieve excellence."

Most plans for school reform depend on agencies of the federal government, states and districts clarifying, codifying and communicating standards (usually in consultation with parents, members of the professional community and the public); also on designing instruments to assess whether the new standards are being adequately met.

This paper argues for a somewhat different order of events: 1) that the twin agents of reform - standards and assessment - should be grounded in practice and worked out in schools and classrooms; 2) that guidelines handed on by federal, state and local education agencies should be characterized by increasing specificity of language the closer they are to the classroom itself.

The reason behind this reconception of responsibilities is the belief that constructive, useful and usable standards are formulated in the context of work; decontextualized, they inevitably become less helpful, less realistic, more rigid; also that teachers and classrooms, in order to become places of active, effective learning, must be protected from over-prescription and constraint imposed from the outside. The primary roles of the federal, state and local departments of education should be to provide guidelines for good practice, support reform and oversee equity.

Looking at the role, for instance, of the federal government in public education, it might be tempting to say that statements on this level have no meaning. I think that would be wrong. The goal of achieving "excellence", although certainly non-specific, does deliver the message that school learning is important and needs to improve. This message is understood by agencies from state departments of education to individual schools.

There is a place for the general, idealistic statement. Similarly, there is a place at this level for data on how states are supporting education and for a limited sampling of outcomes - for purposes of equity in allocation of resources and policy-making. The optimal language and form of information for each successive ring of stakeholders needs to be decided on the basis of agreed-on responsibilities. Before going on to outline my own ideas about appropriate responsibilities and associated language for the major agencies concerned with education, it may be helpful to describe the dynamics of the successive concentric circles.

The entity of child/teacher/parent or caretaker is at the center, the crucial area where words become deeds and then are turned back into words. From the outside in, then,